

PERIOD 1: c. 1450 to c. 1648

Key Concept 1.1. The worldview of European intellectuals shifted from one based on ecclesiastical and classical authority to one based primarily on inquiry and observation of the natural world.

Renaissance intellectuals and artists revived classical motifs in the fine arts and classical values in literature and education. Intellectuals — later called humanists — employed new methods of textual criticism based on a deep knowledge of Greek and Latin, and revived classical ideas that made human beings the measure of all things. Artists formulated new styles based on ancient models. The humanists remained Christians while promoting ancient philosophical ideas that challenged traditional Christian views. Artists and architects such as Brunelleschi, Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael glorified human potential and the human form in the visual arts, basing their art on classical models while using new techniques of painting and drawing, such as geometric perspective. The invention of the printing press in the mid-15th century accelerated the development and dissemination of these new attitudes, notably in Europe north of the Alps (the northern Renaissance).

During the 16th and 17th centuries, Europeans developed new approaches to and methods for looking at the natural world in what historians have called the Scientific Revolution. Aristotle's classical cosmology and Ptolemy's astronomical system came under increasing scrutiny from natural philosophers (later called scientists) such as Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton. The philosophers Francis Bacon and René Descartes articulated comprehensive theories of inductive and deductive reasoning to give the emerging scientific method a sound foundation. Bacon urged the collection and analysis of data about the world and spurred the development of an international community of natural philosophers dedicated to the vast enterprise of what came to be called natural science. In medicine, the new approach to knowledge led physicians such as William Harvey to undertake observations that produced new explanations of anatomy and physiology and to challenge the traditional theory of health and disease (the four humors) espoused by Galen in the second century.

The articulation of natural laws, often expressed mathematically, became the goal of science. The unexpected encounter with the Western Hemisphere at the end of the 15th century further undermined knowledge derived from classical and biblical authorities. The explorations produced new knowledge of geography and the world's peoples through direct observation, and this seemed to give credence to new approaches to knowledge more generally. Yet while they developed inquiry-based epistemologies, Europeans also continued to use traditional explanations of the natural world based on witchcraft, magic, alchemy, and astrology.

Key Concept 1.2. The struggle for sovereignty within and among states resulted in varying degrees of political centralization.

Three trends shaped early modern political development: (1) from decentralized power and authority toward centralization; (2) from a political elite consisting primarily of a hereditary landed nobility toward one open to men distinguished by their education, skills, and wealth; and (3) from religious toward secular norms of law and justice.

One innovation promoting state centralization and the transformation of the landed nobility was the new dominance of firearms and artillery on the battlefield. The introduction of these new technologies, along with changes in tactics and strategy, amounted to a military revolution that reduced the role of mounted knights and castles, raised the cost of maintaining military power beyond the means of individual lords, and led to professionalization of the military on land and sea under the authority of the sovereign. This military revolution favored rulers who could command the resources required for building increasingly complex fortifications and fielding disciplined infantry and artillery units. Monarchs who could increase taxes and create bureaucracies to collect and spend them on their military outmaneuvered those who could not.

In general, monarchs gained power vis-à-vis the corporate groups and institutions that had thrived during the medieval period, notably the landed nobility and the clergy. Commercial and professional groups, such as merchants, lawyers, and other educated and talented persons, acquired increasing power in the state — often in alliance with the monarchs — alongside or in place of these traditional corporate groups. New legal and political theories, embodied in the codification of law, strengthened state institutions, which increasingly took control of the social and economic order from traditional religious and local bodies. However, these developments were not universal. In eastern and southern Europe, the traditional elites maintained their positions in many polities.

The centralization of power within polities took place within and facilitated a new diplomatic framework among states. Ideals of a universal Christian empire declined along with the power and prestige of the Holy Roman Empire, which was unable to overcome the challenges of political localism and religious pluralism. By the end of the Thirty Years' War, a new state system had emerged based on sovereign nation-states and the balance of power.

Key Concept 1.3. Religious pluralism challenged the concept of a unified Europe.

Late medieval reform movements in the Church (including lay piety, mysticism, and Christian humanism) created a momentum that propelled a new generation of 16th-century reformers, such as Erasmus and Martin Luther. After 1517, when Luther posted his 95 Theses attacking ecclesiastical abuses and the doctrines that spawned them, Christianity fragmented, even though religious uniformity remained the ideal. Some states, such as Spain and Portugal, which had recently expelled Muslims and Jews, held fast to this ideal. Others — notably the Netherlands and lands under Ottoman control, which accepted Jewish refugees — did not. In central Europe, the Peace of Augsburg (1555) permitted each state of the Holy Roman Empire to be either Catholic or Lutheran at the option of the prince. By the late 16th century, northern European countries were generally Protestant and Mediterranean countries generally Catholic. To re-establish order after a period of religious warfare, France introduced limited toleration of the minority Calvinists within a Catholic kingdom (Edict of Nantes, 1598; revoked in 1685). Jews remained a marginalized minority wherever they lived.

Differing conceptions of salvation and the individual's relationship to the church were at the heart of the conflicts among Luther, subsequent Protestant reformers such as Calvin and the Anabaptists, and the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic Church affirmed its traditional theology at the Council of Trent (1545–1563), ruling out any reconciliation with the Protestants and inspiring the resurgence of Catholicism in the 17th century. Religious conflicts inevitably merged with and exacerbated long-standing political tensions between the monarchies and nobility across Europe, dramatically escalating these conflicts as they spread from the Holy Roman Empire to France, the Netherlands, and England. Economic issues such as the power to tax and control ecclesiastical resources further heightened these clashes. All three motivations — religious, political, and economic — contributed to the brutal and destructive Thirty Years' War, which was ended by the Peace of Westphalia (1648). The treaty established a new balance of power with a weakened Holy Roman Empire. The Peace of Westphalia also added Calvinism to Catholicism and Lutheranism as an accepted religion in the Holy Roman Empire, ensuring the permanence of European religious pluralism. However, pluralism did not mean religious freedom; the prince or ruler still controlled the religion of the state, and few were tolerant of dissenters.

Key Concept 1.4. Europeans explored and settled overseas territories, encountering and interacting with indigenous populations.

From the 15th through the 17th centuries, Europeans used their mastery of the seas to extend their power in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. In the 15th century, the Portuguese sought direct access by sea to the sources of African gold, ivory, and slaves. At the same time, the rise of Ottoman power in the eastern Mediterranean led to Ottoman control of the Mediterranean trade routes and increased the motivation of Iberians and then northern Europeans to explore possible sea routes to the east. The success and consequences of these explorations, and the maritime expansion that followed them, rested on European adaptation of Muslim and Chinese navigational technology as well as advances in military technology and cartography. Political, economic, and religious rivalries among Europeans also stimulated maritime expansion. By the 17th century, Europeans had forged a global trade network that gradually edged out earlier Muslim and Chinese dominion in the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific.

In Europe, these successes shifted economic power within Europe from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic states. In Asia, the Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch competed for control of trade routes and trading stations. In the Americas, the Spanish and Portuguese led in the establishment of colonies, followed by the Dutch, French, and English. The pursuit of colonies was sustained by mercantilist economic theory, which promoted government management of economic imperatives and policies. The creation of maritime empires was also animated by the religious fervor sweeping Europe during the period of the reformations (Catholic and Protestant). Global European expansion led to the conversion of indigenous populations in South and Central America, to an exchange of commodities and crops that enriched European and other civilizations that became part of the global trading network, and, eventually, to migrations that had profound effects on Europe. The expansion also challenged parochial worldviews in Christian Europe. Yet the Columbian Exchange also unleashed several ecological disasters — notably the death of vast numbers of the Americas' population in epidemics of European diseases, such as smallpox and measles, against which the native populations had no defenses. The establishment of the plantation system in the American colonies also led to the vast expansion of the African slave trade, one feature of the new Atlantic trading system.